

# The Caste Continuum: Intersectional Identities and Visual Metaphors in *Geeli Pucchi* (2021)

Prasitha V, Bhuvaneshwari G\*

Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India. \*Corresponding Author's Email: bhuvaneshwari.sb@gmail.com

## Abstract

In Indian society, the caste system and its social hierarchies result in the marginalization of certain communities, notably the Dalits. Within the Dalit community, Dalit women face greater discrimination as their caste and gender identities intersect and intensify their plight. Similarly, the entrenched gender binary system and the dominant heterosexuality marginalize the queer community people. This intersection of Dalit, women, and queer identity unveils the challenges faced by individuals who navigate these marginalized identities. Films have emerged as the voices of marginalized communities and have made an effort to incorporate Dalit Queer narratives, depicting the harsh realities unfolding in Indian society. The paper offers a critical reading of a Bollywood short film *Geeli Pucchi* (2021) directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, the third part of the Netflix web series (anthology) titled "*Ajeeb Daastaans*". The select film portrays the complex interplay of caste, gender, and sexuality. The paper attempts to analyze the intersectional realities of caste in lesbian love and argues that caste as an identity is a prominent oppressor that intersects with other identities such as gender and sexuality, complicating the lived realities of an individual. The paper further explores the visual metaphors employed in the select film, revealing the pervasive influence of caste in our daily lives.

**Keywords:** Dalits, Films, Gender, Identities, Intersection, Queer, Visuals.

## Introduction

The Dalits in Indian society are subjected to social, economic, and political marginalization, based on their caste identity. Despite the existence of Article 15 in the Indian Constitution (1950), which explicitly prohibits discrimination against citizens based on factors such as religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of these, discrimination remains pervasive in Indian society to date. Endogamy, the practice of marrying within the same caste, "is a significant feature of the caste system" (1). In *The Annihilation of Caste*, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar identified endogamy as the core of the caste system and emphasized that inter-caste marriage will serve as a solvent for caste divisions in India (2). However, inter-caste marriages are met with honor killings in India as it is viewed as polluting the purity of the caste system (3). In Uttarakhand (2022), a Dalit politician named Jagdish Chandra married an upper-caste woman, Geeta Singh. Later, Jagdish was kidnapped and brutally battered to death by his in-laws. "Oppression, violence, discrimination, and marginalization against the lower castes are diseases of Indian

culture" (4). This illustrates how Dalits are being oppressed and how caste remains a formidable barrier to heterosexual love and marriages, even in the 21st century. Debates regarding inter-caste relationships have traditionally been limited to the context of heterosexuality. "Heterosexism as an ideological framework started denigrating non-heterosexual conduct, and homosexuals are subjected to discrimination, verbal abuse, and physical attacks in a culturally conservative and ideologically dense society like India"(5). Heterosexuality is the dominant sexual orientation in Indian society which is often reinforced through societal norms. This dominance of heterosexuality leads to the marginalization of other sexual orientations. Even within the dominant framework of heterosexuality, inter-caste marriage encounters significant resistance. Given this backdrop, the inter-caste love among homosexuals creates multiple layers of challenges. Thus, in the current context, it is crucial to address inter-caste love within the queer community. The members of the LGBTQIA+ community in India often feel

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pressured to lead secluded lives and endure isolation. During the British Colonial rule in India, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was introduced to criminalize homosexuality. The movement against Section 377 began in India in the early 1990s. After multiple legal battles and judgments, India decriminalized same-sex relationships in the year 2018. While there has been some progress in accepting homosexual identities over the past years, there remains a reluctance to embrace caste identities among the general population. A mother (Padma) posted a matrimonial advertisement in 2015 in Mumbai Tabloid, a *Mid-day* newspaper, for her gay son (Harish), claiming that there is no caste barrier. However, she subtly emphasized a preference for an Iyer background by using brackets, which reveals the underlying influence of caste considerations in matters of Queer love. The advertisement reads, "Seeking 25-40, Well-placed, Animal-loving, Vegetarian GROOM for my son [36, 5'11"] who works with an NGO, Caste No Bar (Though IYER preferred)". The acceptance of gay identity represents a significant step forward in challenging conventional gender norms and heterosexuality, fostering societal inclusion. However, the prioritization of caste highlights the persistence of caste-based discrimination emerging even within the queer love. Comparably, a noteworthy incident unfolded in Agra (2018) involving two women entering into matrimonial unions. Contrary to being framed as a lesbian marriage, the digital news headlines shed light on the significance of their respective castes. *The Daily News and Analysis* presents the headlines as "Breaking caste-gender barriers: Dalit and Brahmin girls tie the knot in Agra, leave police baffled" (6), and, the *Latestly* features the headlines as "Dalit & Brahmin Lesbian Couple Gets Married: Unique Case Which Breaks Barrier of Caste & Gender in Agra". The focus is not completely on the homosexuals getting married, but rather on their different castes as well. This indicates that love and marriages were devoid of significance and held little value without addressing caste. The inclusion of caste names in these digital news headlines underscores the existence of caste identity among queer people. While there are individuals who accept queer people, a significant part of the society still struggles to accept them, resulting in the

marginalization of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Similarly, Dalit individuals endure societal exclusion based on their caste identity. Thus, introducing caste dynamics into the queer community could compound the oppression of Dalits within the queer group, subjecting Dalit queers to double discrimination. Further, the intersection of Dalit, women, and queer leads to the triple oppression of individuals who navigate the intersection of these identities. The select film *Geeli Pucchi (2021)* centers on the lives of two women: Bharti Mandal, a primary Dalit protagonist who works as a laborer in a factory, and Priya Sharma, a Brahmin, who serves as a data operator in the same factory. While Bharti confronts the challenges of caste prejudice in her workplace, she also deals with sexual identity in her personal life. On the other hand, Priya is conscious of her caste identity (Brahmin) and struggles to break free of societal norms and accept her homosexual identity. Therefore, the paper intends to read the select film critically and show that caste as an identity is persistent and intersects and disseminates in other forms of identity. This film holds a significant importance as it deals with the intersection of caste and sexuality, a subject that is rarely discussed in Indian cinema. While many Indian films continue to focus on the theme of acceptance and coming out within the context of queer narrative, and the theme of gender discrimination in Dalit narrative, the select film's futuristic vision offers a lens to examine how cultural perceptions toward same-sex relationship may evolve but caste prejudices continue to remain a barrier for true inclusivity. The research uses a qualitative approach, to examine the intersection of various identities in the life of Bharti Mandal and to analyze the visual metaphors that represent caste distinctions in the film's narrative. The research aims to answer the following questions. How does the select film depict the intersectional realities of Dalit queer women? How does the discrimination of Dalit women differ from that of women of the upper caste? How do visual metaphors serve to represent caste disparities in the select film? Caste, which is predominantly present in Indian society, has influenced various spheres of people's life and the field of cinema is not an exception from the pervasive influence of the caste system. Bollywood, India's leading film industry

reinforces the predominance of caste hierarchies and underrepresents the Dalits. A study conducted by Singh and Azeez shows that the majority of protagonists in Bollywood carry the surnames of dominant castes and upholds the values and norms of the same, thereby neglecting the Dalits in mainstream cinema (7). *Achhut Kanya* (1936) directed by Franz Osten is the first caste-based film that depicts the relationship between a boy (Brahmin) and a girl (Dalit). This film explores the inability of a Brahmin boy to cross over his caste boundaries and marry a Dalit girl. The representation remains the same even in the twenty-first century as the film *Aakrosh* (2010) by Priyadarshan, deals with inter-caste marriage and honor killings. Even after 86 years of *Achhut Kanya's* release, "Bollywood still does not show any significant transformation in depicting the inter-caste marriage specifically between dominant caste and Dalit character" (7). Two decades after the release of *Achhut Kanya*, the movie *Sujata* (1953) was released which revolves around a Brahmin couple who adopts a Dalit girl. "She is portrayed as an under-confident, submissive, homely, introvert, and barely literate Dalit girl" (8). Though she is brought up in a Brahmin family, she is treated as an untouchable by society. Bollywood attempted to portray the unpleasant realities of the caste system by depicting Dalits as the victims of oppression and discrimination as shown in the film *Sujata* (1959). Bollywood has portrayed stereotypical representations of Dalit characters as emotional individuals with disheveled appearances and darker skin tones as depicted in films such as *Sujata* (1959), *Souten* (1983), and *Lagaan* (2015). They are also portrayed as individuals who hate themselves because of their Dalit identity to the extent of ending their own life. "Suicide becomes the common theme in films like *Sujata* (1959) and *Souten* (1983) where Dalit protagonists prefer death over every day struggles of Dalit lives" (8). The construction of these stereotypical representations stems from the lack of Dalit directors in Bollywood (9). Most of the films that represent caste-based issues are directed by directors from dominant castes, resulting in narratives that uphold the prominence of dominant castes and underrepresent or victimize the Dalit characters. "Bollywood obsession with dominant caste can be traced from the dominance

of directors and producers belonging to dominant castes" (7). Vishal Chauhan (2019) argues that the stereotypical representation of Dalits is constructed and shaped by the dominant culture on one hand and the power discourses on the other. This is also exemplified in films such as *Swades* (2004) and *Lagaan* (2010) as it depicts upper-caste individuals as the main protagonists voicing out for Dalits. These films depict Dalits as either beneficiaries of Brahmanical compassion or as victims of Brahmanical patriarchal violence. In the movie *Swades* (2004), an upper-caste man who works as a scientist in America returns to India and encounters casteism and poverty issues. He is shown as a well-educated man who struggles for equality in Indian society. Similarly, the film *Lagaan* (2001), depicts the conflict between colonial authorities and the villagers who struggle to pay taxes. The local commander Captain Russel makes an offer to the villagers that if they could defeat British soldiers in the game of cricket, tax would not be collected for the next three years. The upper caste protagonist forms a team with individuals from different religions and castes, including a Dalit named Kachra. The teammates who initially refused to accept Dalit as a player along with them, eventually accepted him. In both films, Dalits are portrayed as miserable social outcasts who need rescue, while upper-caste men are presented as agents of societal change (4, 10). "A Savarna hero (upper caste individual) who acts as the messiah to attempt to set free the villagers from the clutches of Savarna patriarchy and casteist politics" (11). Within the dominant caste hierarchies, Dalit women face greater oppression and the bodies of Dalit women become the target of exploitation by the upper caste individuals. *Ankur* (1974), *Manthan* (1976), and *Nishant* (1975), a trilogy of movies by Shyam Benegal, depicts how the dominant upper-caste landlords conspire to enslave Dalit individuals, especially Dalit women (4). Bollywood films often portray the narratives of sexual exploitation experienced by low-caste women, as depicted in films like *Bandit Queen* and *Article 15*. *Bandit Queen* (1994) by Shekar Kapur was the first film to be based on the real-life of a Dalit woman named Phoolan Devi who was sexually assaulted by Thakurs (high caste landlords), depicting the complex interplay of caste and gender in the lives of Dalit women. The

film *Article 15* (2019) follows the story of an upper-caste protagonist Ayan Ranjan (Ayushmann Khurrana), who is assigned to investigate the violent rape and murder case of young Dalit girls. “The low caste women’s bodies proved to be an extraordinary template for modernizing the socio-political discourses for the Hindi cinema makers” (12). In the 2021 study, Pal *et al.*, explore how the hierarchical caste system and the hegemonic masculinity control the bodies of Dalit women, constructing their analysis on the cinematic representations in films such as *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Article 15* (2019). The narratives of both the film revolve around the pain and suffering of Dalit women, oppressed and raped by the upper caste men. Jyoti Atwal (2018) in her research article argues that the narratives of low-caste women often portray their pain and victimhood while ignoring the anger towards the caste system which perpetuates their oppression, emphasizing the need for the prominent portrayal of Dalit women not merely as powerless passive women or as victims but as active players in the growth and progress of the nation. The recently released Bollywood films align with this perspective and portray Dalit women not merely as victims but also as rebellious and independent individuals who fight for their rights. For example: the characters Gaura and Bharti in the films *Article 15* (2019) and *Geeli Pucchi* (2020) exemplify this shift. Lalitha & Pankaj (2022) in their research article discussed the emergence of Dalit women characters, drawing analysis from the cinematic representation of *Karnan*, *Geeli Pucchi*, *Article 15* and *200 Halla Ho*. “Dalit women do not consider themselves victims. They have emerged as leaders who have developed self-confidence and the capacity to assert their rights when oppressors attempt to humiliate them” (13). While there has been an increase in films addressing caste issues, featuring characters who amplify Dalit voices and portraying Dalit women characters as independent, there still exists tension regarding marriages between a Dalit and an upper caste individual. Anwer and Arora in their study examine contemporary Bollywood films such as Neeraj Ghaywan’s *Masaan* (2015) and Anubhav Sinha’s *Article 15* (2019), focusing on the heterosexual couples in the casteist world. Their study concludes that though these films deal with caste issues, there is incompleteness in the

portrayal of Dalit couples and their marriages with upper-caste people, reflecting the societal system that renders such forms of love seemingly unattainable. The representation of LGBTQIA+ themes in Bollywood has been misrepresented in few films. The film *Fire* (1996) portrayed the concept of lesbian relationship and justified the act as two women were not satisfied physically by their spouses. Films such as *Dostana* (2008) and *Student of the Year* (2012) have mocked the concept of homosexuality. In recent years, Bollywood has made strides in the representation of queer narrative but still focuses on the struggles of self-acceptance and societal acceptance as shown in the films such as *Aligarh* (2016), *Kapoor & Sons* (2016), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekho Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), and *Badhaai Do* (2022). In all these films, the narrative continues to highlight the lack of societal acceptance within the context of same-sex love and the enduring pain of homosexual individuals, but the influence of caste in shaping those experiences is overlooked. Thus, it is evident from the historical contextualization that Bollywood films which attempted to address caste issues have largely ignored the sexual orientation of Dalit characters, often focusing on their oppression and the problems of heterosexual inter-caste marriages. The films that addressed queer relationships have ignored bringing in caste as an issue. However, the chosen film for the study has made an effort to portray Dalit woman’s sexuality, incorporating the oppression of being both Dalit and queer, setting it apart from the earlier portrayals of caste and LGBTQIA+ themed films. Previous research has examined the stereotypical representation of Dalits, challenges faced by Dalit women who encounter double discrimination, the sexual objectification of Dalit women’s bodies by upper caste people, and how Dalits are consistently portrayed in Bollywood often through the Brahmanical gaze as either victims or as secondary roles. However, this study breaks new ground by analyzing a film that is directed by a Dalit director which centers the Dalit woman as the protagonist, who is also depicted as a lesbian. The select film reflects the ongoing struggles of Dalits and queer people in India, mirroring the social hierarchies based on caste. On one hand, the film challenges the broader cultural and social

movements by representing a lesbian relationship in Indian context which is rarely explored. On the other hand, the film aligns with the caste-based system which is still persisting in Indian society. Thus, the paper delves deeper into analyzing the intersectional identities of a protagonist who is subjected to triple discrimination based on her caste, gender, and sexual orientation. In contrast to prior representations which portray Dalit women as either victims or sexual objects, the primary character of Dalit woman in the select film emerges as a resilient figure that overcomes societal constraints and deftly manages her emotions to achieve personal growth and empowerment. The paper delves into the intersection of caste identity with other forms of identities such as gender and sexuality and argues that caste as an identity stands as a strong factor that affect and impact lived realities of an individual.

## Methodology

The research has employed qualitative content analysis to examine the dialogues and symbols of the select film, incorporating a theory of intersectionality. "Intersectionality" was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to address the intersectional oppression faced by African-American women. She points out the limitation of feminist theory as it focuses on one form of marginalized identity (gender) and neglects the other forms of intersectional oppression (Dalit women, disabled women, black women, and queer women) faced by women. For example: Dalit women, fall under the category of intersectional oppression by being both Dalit and a woman, experiencing the complexities of double discrimination. This doubly oppressed group is recognized as a distinct category as the struggles of Dalit women cannot be comprehended by being only a woman or by being a Dalit man. It includes how these two identities of caste and gender intersect and affect each other. The struggles of Dalit women are neither addressed in feminism nor in a Dalit movement, leading to the emergence of Dalit feminism in the 1990s (14). Similarly, "It is seen that queer politics is caste blind while caste politics is queer blind" (15). This marginalizes the individuals who exist at the intersection of both Dalit and queer identities, leading to the emergence of a Dalit queer movement. In November 2015, three young Dalit

queers, Dhruvo Jyoti, Akhil Khang, and Dhiren Borisa, held up a board with powerful words "Dalit, queer, proud". This fusion of caste within queer movement may not be important for Brahmin queers, whereas it holds specific significance for Dalit queers. Parikshit, a Dalit queer, in his narrative, says that "In the absence of livelihood there is no real meaning of being queer. What is the point in saying oh you can kiss in public if you cannot be alive in public?" (15). This emphasizes the significance of addressing the multiple intersectional identities of a marginalized individual and sets a theoretical background for this study. Thus, intersectionality serves to underscore that individuals do not experience oppression from one form of identity, rather the experiences of an individual are shaped by the interconnectedness of various identities to which they belong (16, 17). This paper uses intersectionality as a lens to study how caste, gender, and queer identities, intersect in the select Bollywood film *Geeli Puchhi* – a third part of an anthology named *Ajeeb Daastaans*.

## Results

### Caste Consciousness in Lesbian Love: Intersectional Realities

Neeraj Ghaywan, a Dalit director in the Hindi film industry, addresses the underrepresented viewpoints of Dalit communities through his films (*Masaan*, 2015; *Geeli Puchhi*, 2021). His films act as a mirror to social realities, unveiling the intricacies of intersectionality within the social structure. "Neeraj Ghaywan is a contemporary filmmaker in Indian cinema who tends to address and reflect social reality through his films" (18). The film *Geeli Puchhi* (2021) by Ghaywan explores the interconnectedness of identities such as caste, gender, and sexuality and how these identities shape the interactions of an individual within society. The film also depicts caste as an oppressive identity that has a significant influence on other identities and impacts the lived realities of an individual. Bharti Mandal, the only female laborer in the factory, aspires to become the data operator in the same factory but faces rejection due to her Dalit identity. This rejection underscores the inequalities faced by Dalits, in accessing opportunities for upward mobility. Dashrath, another laborer in the factory tells Bharti that mastering Excel and tally may not guarantee her a job. "Because you are Bharti

Mandal. Do you have a privileged caste surname like Banerjee or Sharma? We are Dalits” (19), highlighting the strong relationship between caste and occupation as India’s caste system originated as a way of dividing labor in which “the Dalits or untouchables occupies the lowest step of social ladder” (20, 21). On the other hand, Priya Sharma, a married Brahmin woman, gets hired for the position of data operator despite lacking relevant qualifications. This illustrates the persistence of caste-based networks in private sectors, with members of higher castes generally holding higher positions in society and those of lower castes constantly maintaining lower positions. This goes with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who once compared caste to a “multi-storeyed tower with no staircase and no entrance. Everybody had to die in the storey they were born in” (2). Bharti is extremely hurt when she learns that Priya lacks the necessary skills and is chosen for the work only because of her caste identity. This shows how caste identity (Dalit) affects the lived realities of Bharti. “Indian caste system is a complex social structure wherein social roles like one’s profession became hereditary, resulting in restricted social mobility and fixed status hierarchies” (21). This representation of biased workplace based on caste hierarchies, illustrates the socio-political context, presenting caste as a continuum beyond gender and sexuality in the select film. In the film, Priya’s heightened consciousness of caste becomes evident when she asks about Bharti’s surname, to which Bharti responds as Banerjee instead of Mandal, indicating her reluctance to disclose her caste identity as Dalit. The friendship between Bharti and Priya grows as they begin to dine together, share their past experiences, visit parks, and enjoy each other’s company. As the film centers on the intersection of Bharti’s caste and sexuality, the film explicitly depicts Bharti as a lesbian as she is shown worrying about her past relationship while watching a video, in which Bharti kisses another girl. This scene tries to normalize the sexuality of a Dalit woman and hints at her internal conflict. In one of the scenes, when Bharti prepares chicken for Priya, she tastes it and kisses Bharti’s hand. They share a moment of love as they exchange kisses, where it is clear that Priya is a closeted lesbian who is married to a straight man. In this scene, it is apparent that Bharti who

is reluctant to share her caste identity with Priya, is now comfortable disclosing her queer identity. On the other hand, Priya being a Brahmin, views her caste identity as more significant than her queer identity. The different perspective of Priya and Bharti brings a complex interplay between caste and sexuality, reflecting the socio-political dynamics in Indian society. Dhiren Borisa in her paper, *Hopeful Rantings of a Dalit Queer Person*, says that “coming-out” as Dalit has been more difficult a journey than “coming-out” as gays (22). This underscores the reality that caste identity carries a greater stigma than queer identity. In another scene, Priya says that her husband loves her more but she cannot reciprocate his love. Priya even admits her love for Bharti and pleads with Bharti for help as she is unable to make decisions in her life. Bharti gently grasps Priya’s hand and says that,

‘You need to own your truth. That’s the only way you can be happy. I have accepted my truth. Now that you know a part of my truth. Another truth is that, I am not Bharti Banerjee. I am Bharti Mandal. I am a Dalit (19).’

Priya, who initially held Bharti’s hand, hesitantly gives up after Bharti confesses her Dalit identity: the scene clearly shows that caste constitutes same-sex desire as well. Heterosexism has been the prevalent cultural norm in Indian society. However, the film portrays a noticeable change that accepts and embraces non-heteronormative relationships, emphasizing a significant step towards an inclusive society through Bharti’s character. However, the deeply ingrained caste system continues to persist even within the queer love. Despite Priya’s openness towards queer love, her discomfort with Bharti’s caste identity becomes evident. Priya’s acceptance towards same-sex love challenges the socio-cultural norms, but she is unable to transcend the deep-rooted prejudices against falling in love with a Dalit woman. This clearly reflects the intersection of caste with homosexuality. This goes with the narrative of Dalit queer, Gaurav, who says that “While identifying as queer made him mobile, modern and likeable, his Dalit identity continued to be perceived as backward” (8). This highlights the concept of caste as a continuum even in the spaces where conventions are being challenged, visualizing the socio-political context of the Indian society. This intersection of caste identity (Dalit)

with queer identity in the life of Bharti Mandal subjects her to double discrimination. Bharti's Dalit identity leads to rejection both in her workspace and in her queer relationship, highlighting the caste continuum in the life of Bharti. The caste identity (Dalit) of Bharti also intersects with her gender identity and intensifies her discrimination. The factory is portrayed as a male-dominated space where Bharti is shown as dressed in typical male attire, has a behavior perceived as men, and thus becomes the target of discrimination and prejudices. Bharti's dress reflects her defiance against gender roles imposed by society and it also shows the lower economic status of a Dalit woman. In this scene, Bharti incorporates a performativity theory of Judith Butler, navigating her queer identity as a form of resistance. Bharti's gender and sexuality defies the cultural expectations placed on her and her performance is shaped by resistance to the societal norms. In a particular scene, a male laborer intervenes with Priya and Bharti during lunch and tells Priya that, "if you stare (Bharti) too long, you will see a beard sprouting on her face. She works her hands on machines all day. She only has her hands to satisfy herself" (19). This dialogue against Bharti, perpetuates the stereotypes and discrimination against Dalit women, undermining her femininity and gender expression. This scene underscores how caste as an identity intersects with the gender identity of Bharti, showing how a Dalit woman is perceived by society who does not fit into the societal norms of gender attires and occupation. The film portrays the factory as lacking access to restroom facilities where Bharti is the only female worker, reflecting the marginalization of Dalit women in the workplace. Bharti's depiction in the factory aligns with the subaltern theorist Spivak and raises question whether being Dalit and a woman, can she ever speak where upper caste norms and power relations prevail. The film also depicts the personal life of Bharti as a divorced woman who lives independently and her only companion is the street dog that highlights the lack of familial support in the life of a divorced Dalit woman. Her lonely existence symbolizes her resilience and self-sufficiency amid societal barriers and discrimination. The film portrays how being a Dalit woman; Bharti endures social exclusion in her professional and personal life. The life of

Bharti clearly illustrates that experiences of oppression do not come from one form of identity; rather the experience of oppression is shaped by the interconnectedness of various identities. Thus, the film vividly portrays how caste as an identity is playing a major role in shaping the cultural norms of the society influencing gender dynamics, heterosexual marriages, and workspace environments. The film also shows the continuous presence of caste in the evolving queer community, highlighting how its intersection with gender and sexuality complicates the lived realities of an individual (Bharti). But there is a shift in the treatment with Priya who enters as a new employee. The laborers in the factory received her with respect and treated her fairly. Being a Brahmin, Priya's caste identity is intricately linked to her gender identity laying limitations on her personal choices and desires. Though Priya finds herself as a lesbian, Priya is portrayed as the victim of patriarchy where she adheres to the societal norms of marrying a man and fulfilling her duties as a wife. This personal choice of Priya conforming to the heteronormativity reinforces the idea of compulsory heterosexuality by Adrienne Rich. She is aware of her caste identity and the consequences of disclosing her sexual orientation which could lead her to face societal exclusion. Priya is shown struggling with the challenges of intersecting identities in a society defined by prejudice and exclusion by choosing to uphold her caste identity over her homosexual identity. In one of the scenes, Priya's mother-in-law warns Priya, about her social interaction with other caste people and even questions about Bharti's caste. This scene serves as a reminder of resistance when it comes to interactions of higher caste people with the people of lower caste. This caste consciousness of higher caste people and their reluctance to social interactions with the lower caste people raises questions about the broader inclusiveness of the society. In another scene, Priya tells Bharti that her mother-in-law insists her to quit the job as there are no female employees in the factory. These instances deliberately show how Priya's caste identity limits her societal interaction and personal choices. "Brahmanical patriarchy is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are

crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes” (23). While both the women in the narrative experience gender discrimination, their caste identity makes significant disparities in the way they endure oppression. “Hence, women’s oppression is not unitary in Indian society, and women submit to the gender norms of their respective caste. As a result, the sufferings of the upper caste women are different from those of the lower caste” (7). The film depicts Priya, a Brahmin woman as suppressed by her familial expectations but is accorded a certain level of respect within the society whereas Bharti, a Dalit woman faces oppression in her personal life and from the society at large. The intersection of Bharti’s Dalit identity, sexual identity, and gender identity results in triple discrimination within the narrative of the film. Contrary to typical depictions of Dalit women in Bollywood as either victims or sexual objects, Bharti manages her emotional resilience and strategically pursues her dream towards the end though she endures triple oppression of caste, gender, and sexuality throughout the film. Thus, the paper brings out the graded inequalities of the societal structure by examining caste-based discrimination and its intersections with other identities.

#### **Unveiling Caste Identities: Visual Metaphors in *Geeli Pucchi***

This analysis unveils the representation of different caste identities and the intricate layers of meaning embedded in the visuals of the select film *Geeli Pucchi*. According to Masoodi, blue serves as a symbol of the Dalit movement as Ambedkar chose the blue flag to represent the scheduled caste federation movement which he founded in the year 1952 (24). Blue, as a color of Dalit resistance, is also associated with the sky, “a representation of non-discrimination, that under the sky everyone is believed to be equal” (24). The select film uses a strategic color palette to represent caste identities, employing blue as a visual form to represent Dalit identity. The film opens with a tracking shot of Bharti, dressed in blue, as she walks through the factory. This deliberate choice of blue serves as a visual cue, symbolizing Bharti’s identity as a Dalit and her status as a blue-collar worker. Within the factory, the cylinders are meticulously arranged based on colors, with blue cylinders on one side and brown

reflects the existing caste divide with blue symbolizing the marginalized Dalit community and brown symbolizing the dominant Hindu caste, mirroring the fixed boundaries of the caste system. As Bharti starts working, she is portrayed as taking one of the blue cylinders. This visual is seen as a significant gesture that reinforces her Dalit identity by portraying her reaching for blue cylinders within the walls of the factory. Bharti notices the factory manager and a new employee Priya Sharma entering the factory against the backdrop of brown cylinders, which serve as a reminder of social stratification. This visual contrast between Priya and Bharti emphasizes the enduring caste divisions. The scenes where Priya and Bharti meet outside the factory feature a Dalit Bharti, dressed in subdued colors that stand in contrast with the vibrant colors of Priya’s attire. Using color symbolism, the film depicts the complexities of the caste system through its visuals. Food is another visual metaphor used in the film to represent caste differentiation. Food plays a major role in reinstating caste practices in India. The film employs close-up shots within its frame, featuring food to highlight the differences between characters and their caste identities. Priya, who is a Brahmin, joins Bharti for lunch at the mess as there are no other female employees in the factory. When Priya, a Brahmin, shares her stuffed okra with Bharti who is a Dalit, Bharti refuses to have it. This initial reluctance to share food reflects the enduring stigma associated with inter-caste dining. Food restrictions based on caste have historically imposed ideas of pollution and purity, limiting what certain caste groups can eat and with whom they can share meals (25). As the narrative unfolds, Bharti accepts and shares food with Priya, a Brahmin, challenging the boundaries of caste-based food taboos. The movie portrays the different stages of their friendship that grow through food. In terms of eating habits, Dalits are often forced to eat beef and pork out of economic necessity (26), as they work in jobs that are considered unclean, which puts them at the lower stratum of the social hierarchy. Brahmins, on the other hand, can afford vegetables and dairy products. This aspect can be seen in certain scenes where Priya, a Brahmin is shown eating stuffed okra, vegetable pulao, and Dahi vada seasoned with spices. Brahmins follow a vegetarian diet and refrain from meat



consumption as it is perceived as impure and does not align with their notions of purity. The association between vegetarianism and purity, non-vegetarianism and impurity intersects with caste dynamics in India. "A vegetarian, by default, is considered clean, calm and pure vis-à-vis a non-vegetarian who, according to popular perception, is violent and filthy" (26). In one of the scenes, Bharti invites Priya for lunch, where she prepares chicken for Priya. In this scene, the director purposefully depicts Bharti's preparation of chicken to represent her caste identity through food. Priya tastes it and says that she hasn't eaten chicken since she got married. This scene hints at the interplay of caste boundaries and personal food choices of Priya. Though this dialogue brings in Priya's desire to consume non-vegetarian food, it also shows the restrictions imposed by her in-laws that reflect the ingrained higher caste people's restrictions on food that consider eating chicken as impure. In another scene, Priya's husband buys an eggless cake for Priya's birthday, which reflects the pure vegetarian diet practices followed by the Brahmins. These scenes underscore the significant role of food in highlighting the distinctions among different caste identities. "Castes are sharply differentiated according to whether or not they eat meat" (25). Towards the end of the film, When Bharti visits Priya's home, Priya's mother-in-law offers tea in a different cup to Bharti, symbolizing the prevailing distinction between them. By offering tea in a different cup, Bharti is treated as an untouchable. Thus, the relationship which developed through the shared food, ultimately ends with the food that serves as a divider between different caste identities. Therefore, food is used as a visual metaphor to portray the caste distinctions of Bharti and Priya. Further, the film effectively portrays caste distinctions through spatial dynamics. Priya being the upper caste woman and a data operator works on the upper floor of the factory. While Bharti being a Dalit and a factory laborer works on the ground floor. This shows the class and caste divide within the factory setting. The film portrays the scenes where Priya goes ground floor to have lunch with Bharti, symbolizing an attempt to bridge the caste gap. However, Priya faces opposition from her manager who forbids her from interacting with workers on the ground floor. This sheds light on

the influence of caste identity that resists interpersonal relationships of Priya. In another scene, Priya invites Bharti to her Birthday party. As the celebration unfolds, Bharti is depicted standing apart from the crowd, highlighting the social distance between Bharti and Priya. The film underscores how caste identity not only dictates social interactions but also the shared spaces of an individual. Further, when Priya's birthday is celebrated by the factory managers in a room, Bharti is explicitly excluded from the social gathering in the factory. Priya directs Bharti to stay outside the room. This serves to perpetuate the social norms that exclude people based on their caste identity.

## Discussion

Through its narrative, the film depicts the challenges stemming from Bharti's caste identity which directly influences her job, gender, and the way she is desired by others (sexuality). The struggles faced by Bharti Mandal clearly show that the denial of her job or the rejection of Priya's love are not based on her personal identity but are deeply rooted in societal prejudices that prioritize and uphold caste identities over other forms of identities. Caste is thus portrayed as a prominent oppressor as it intersects and complicates other forms of Bharti's identities such as gender and sexuality that bring a huge impact on the lived realities of Bharti. The film highlights the persistent influence of caste identity in the daily lives of people by implying caste distinctions in colors, food, and spatial dynamics, bringing attention to the widespread discrimination that Dalit communities face. By critically analyzing the select film, the paper shows how caste as an identity, serves not only as a prominent oppressor of an individual but also complicates and shapes the experiences of an individual by intersecting with various forms of identities (gender and sexuality), leading a Dalit protagonist to face triple discrimination.

## Conclusion

While the film attempts to portray lesbian love marks a breakthrough for queer community people, it also unveils the entrenched casteism that depicts how caste governs queer love, making it inaccessible for low-caste people, especially Dalits. As such, caste remains a barrier to achieve inclusivity and equality. Despite appearing

modern on the surface by embracing homosexuality, Bollywood continues to struggle with the deep-rooted issue of the caste system. The film underscores the widespread impact of caste within the emerging queer community, highlighting its dominant role and it also shows how caste is present in the daily lives of people by using visual metaphors to portray the distinctions of different caste identities. The portrayal shows the inescapable reality of caste that is deep-rooted within the societal structure, perpetuating systematic inequalities and discrimination. The outcaste or the Dalits will face oppression as long as the existence of caste system. The eradication of the caste system is the sole means to free Dalits from the socioeconomic and cultural limitations that drive them to the margins of society. "The Out-caste is a by-product of the Caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the Out-caste except the destruction of the Caste system" (2). Thus, the film challenges the entrenched stigma associated with caste and calls for a systematic society that prioritizes equality for all and the paper prompts reflection on the necessity to dismantle the caste-based barriers to envision an inclusive society.

### Abbreviations

All the abbreviations are already mentioned above.

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